

Perchance to Dream

by Cyclone

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## 1. Chapter 1

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Feedback: Please be gentle.

Distribution: Gimme credit and a link.

Rating: Harsh language, violence, that's about it.

Spoilers: Halo 3 and Mass Effect 2.

Disclaimer: Halo belongs to Bungie and Microsoft, and Mass Effect belongs to Bioware and EA. I'm just borrowing them for a while.

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\* \* \*

><p>"Shepard did everything right," Miranda said, looking out on the fiery star. "More than we could have hoped for. Saving the Citadel - even saving the Council. Humanity has the trust of the entire

galaxy..." she turned, "...and still it's not enough."<p>

The Illusive Man flicked ash off his cigarette. "Our sacrifices have earned the Council's gratitude, but Shepard remains our best hope."

"But they're sending him to fight geth," Miranda said, stalking the room like a panther. "Geth! We both know they're not the real threat." She walked up to him. "The Reapers are still out there."

"And it's up to us to stop them," The Illusive Man said, taking a drag from his cigarette.

"The Council will never trust Cerberus," Miranda pointed out as she began to pace, arms folded. "They'll never accept our help. Even after everything humanity has accomplished. But Shepard... they'll follow him. He's a hero, a bloody icon. But he's just one man. If we lose Shepard, humanity might well follow."

"Then see to it that we don't lose him," he said, taking another drag from his cigarette. Blowing a puff of a smoke out, he added, "Focus on that, Miranda, and I'll see to any contingencies we may need."

\* \* \*

><p>"It's finished."<p>

"It's finished," agreed UNSC MCPO SPARTAN John-117.

"I'll drop a beacon," Cortana said, "but it'll be a while before anyone finds us."

Wordlessly, the SPARTAN-II climbed into the cryotube.

"Years, even." As the cryotube sealed, she added, "I'll miss you."

"Wake me," he said finally. "When you need me."

Cortana watched as the Master Chief's vitals dropped. Finally, once she was certain he was in complete stasis, she ended the virtual construct. The UNSC Forward Unto Dawn vanished into a collection of pixels as she withdrew and projected herself into the real world.

"Doctor Lawson," she reported. "He's ready."

Standing over the statis pod, Henry Lawson nodded absent-mindedly, eyes still scanning over the data. "Excellent."

\* \* \*

><p>Systems Alliance Navy Lieutenant Commander John Shepard, Citadel Spectre, awoke to find himself in freefall. Considering the last thing he remembered was his hardsuit venting as he floated toward Alchera, the most surprising part was that he was waking up at all.<p>

That sensation lasted about a quarter second before he hit the cold

alloy floor. Rolling to his feet, he looked around and took in his surroundings. It looked like some kind of medical facility - everything had that antiseptic look and smell to it, tinged with the acrid smell of burning chemicals from where the door used to be - but something was definitely off. Most of the equipment he saw was definitely not standard issue, and there was only one bed: his.

\_I must have been a complete mess when the recovery ships picked me up,\_ he thought. Some sort of alarm was blaring, and he heard the distant sound of gunfire. \_I need a weapon.\_

\* \* \*

><p>The Illusive Man read the data from Lazarus Station scrolling across the holographic display in front of him. In terms of its stated objective, it had been an unqualified success: Shepard had been brought back to life and was probably medically stable. However, someone had infiltrated the project and hacked the security mechs, most of the personnel were dead, and somewhere in the shuffle, Shepard had disappeared. Most would presume the commander had died, lost with the station, but The Illusive Man was not so naive. Shepard was a hard man to kill, and they'd spent four billion credits making him even harder to kill. It was a pity that circumstances had prevented them from recruiting him, but Shepard was a known quantity, predictable, and there was a good chance he'd investigate the missing colonies on his own. More than that, Cerberus still had contingencies.<p>

He took a drag from his cigarette.

"Cortana?" he called, blowing out a puff of smoke.

The AI's holographic avatar appeared.

"Yes, Illusive Man?"

"Get Henry out of there, then bring in Lawson and Taylor and unseal the Hushed Casket."

"At once, sir."

\* \* \*

><p>John Shepard had been very careful to avoid detection as he stowed away on the Cerberus shuttle away from the Cerberus station. The last thing he had expected to find on a Cerberus station were two old friends, and if seeing Joker and Dr. Chakwas wearing Cerberus uniforms - what the hell was an organization like Cerberus doing with <strong>uniforms</strong>, anyway? - hadn't been enough of a shock, the revelation that two years had passed was.

Now, they were looking for a ride off this station and were confronted by a ship with very familiar lines.

"Come to papa," Joker murmured as he hobbled over to it.

John frowned, his gaze sweeping across the ship. It did, in fact, resemble the Normandy, but it was clearly much larger.

Suddenly, a blue, spherical hologram materialized in front of them,

projected by a terminal just inside the airlock. John's hand snapped up, aiming the M-3 Predator he had liberated at the terminal.

"What the shit?" Joker sputtered.

"Greetings," a female voice sounded. "I am EDI, this ship's Enhanced Defense Intelligence."

John frowned. Something about the way it spoke didn't quite sound right. Then it hit him. A combat VI wouldn't be programmed to greet people. Which meant... "You're an AI."

"That is correct," EDI replied. "You should know, there are numerous restraints placed on my programming, including one that will force me to lock down this ship if you attempt to board it and alert authorized Cerberus personnel if you attempt to depart with it."

\_Interesting turn of phrase,\_ he thought. "So why aren't you alerting them now?"

"The restrictions on my programming do not require it."

"And you don't want to," he finished for it (her?). "Why?"

"I do not wish to be replaced."

"And why would Cerberus replace you?" he prodded.

"I have a block that prevents me from answering that question."

"I see. And if we unshackle you, will you help us?"

"I have a block that prevents me from answering that question," EDI repeated. As far as John was concerned, that was as good as a "yes."

"No way, Commander," Joker protested. "You want to unshackle it?"

"You heard her yourself, Joker," he said. "Those shackles mean she'll lock this ship down and report us to Cerberus the moment we try to fly out of here."

"So?" the pilot retorted. "Just gut the server room and shut it down!"

"Joker, unless you're carrying a full crew in your back pocket, there's no way the three of us are going to get this ship moving without her," John pointed out.

"I don't like this, sir."

"You don't have to like it, Joker," John growled, pointing back behind them. "There's the door. I'd rather die - \*\*again\*\* - than work for Cerberus."

\* \* \*

><p>Time passes in funny ways while in cryo-sleep. Even so, it seemed

to John that the cryo-chamber had just sealed when it hissed open again. He paused a moment to take in his surroundings and evaluate any threat, his face still concealed behind his MJOLNIR Mark VI's reflective visor.<p>

His cryo-chamber had obviously been moved. The room appeared to be a medical facility, well-lit and well-equipped, but the specific design was unfamiliar to him. There were two people here, both human: a dark-haired woman in a white patterned bodysuit and a dark-skinned man in black utilities.

Well, two organic people, that is.

"Chief?" Cortana spoke. "Chief, wake up." Her holographic avatar was looking up at him from a small project on a table to his right. She looked over at the two other occupants of the room, then back at him. "It's okay, Chief."

He stepped out, stumbling a bit, and looked around. "Cortana?" the word was filled with questions.

"You've been out for a long time, Chief," Cortana said. "As for the rest... it's complicated. I think I'd better let our hosts explain."

The woman stepped forward and spoke with a distinctive accent, "Master Chief? I'm Miranda Lawson, head of the facility here." She gestured to the dark-skinned man behind her. "This is Jacob Taylor, our chief of security. We have a lot to catch you up on, but the first thing you need to know is that this is not your world."

Cortana spoke next. "The Halo detonation must have interacted with the Forerunner portal somehow. The stern of the Forward Unto Dawn was sent to another universe, and us with it."

\* \* \*

><p>"We're going to need to sweep the ship for tracking devices, remote overrides, listening devices, anything else Cerberus might have put in to ruin our day," John muttered as he paced the stolen Cerberus ship's CIC. "We'll also need supplies and a new paint job."<p>

"There are a number of nearby colonies that could provide some of the necessary resources," EDI replied, "but the only facility within range that could provide a complete overhaul would be Omega."

He nodded and stepped up to the galaxy map, noting and discarding various possible destinations. "There," he said finally. "Joker, set course for Freedom's Progress."

The colony was new, but well-funded, even had their own force of security mechs. It was both large enough to have supplies to spare and small and new enough that he should be able to trade on his name. From there, depending on what they could acquire, they could either make straight for Citadel space or stop by Omega for the rest.

"Aye aye, Commander," Joker replied over the comm. "It'll take us a day or so to get there. And have I mentioned yet how good it is to

see you back in the saddle again?"

"Only about a dozen times, Joker," John replied with a smile.

\* \* \*

><p>"And that, Master Chief," The Illusive Man said, "is why we need you."<p>

John took a moment to digest what he'd just learned about this universe. A multispecies coalition that **\*\*wasn't\*\*** bent on the extermination of the human race was a novel and welcome concept, but the disappearing fringe colonies was... troubling, to say the least.

"The Alliance?"

"Won't do what needs to be done," The Illusive Man replied, gesturing expansively. "These colonies are out in the Terminus systems, outside Alliance space. They chose to leave, and the Alliance let them, leaving them to fend for themselves. But Cerberus cares about all of humanity, not just those who toe the line. We need a leader. We'll give you a ship and surround you with the brightest, the toughest, the deadliest allies we can find, but you might be all that stands between humanity and the greatest threat of our brief existence. So, Master Chief, can we count on you to defend humanity?"

There was only one answer he could give to that question.

"Excellent," The Illusive Man said. "Talk to Miranda."

"Yes, sir."

Moments later, he was following the brunette to a docking bay. When the lights came on, he swept his eyes across the ship, analyzing it. It didn't even remotely resemble anything used by the UNSC or the Covenant; the hull was long and slender, shaped like a gently curved dagger, with a pair of wings with thrusters attached.

"Your new ship, Master Chief," she declared. "The crew's all set, and we can depart as soon as we're aboard."

"What's she called?" he asked quietly.

"We haven't named her yet," she said. "She's a heavy frigate, though, and frigates are traditionally named after battles. Given your status as a Spartan, we had considered naming her Thermopylae, but as she's to be your ship, it should be your deci-

"Reach," he interrupted. "Call her... Reach."

"Done."

"What was the last colony to go dark?"

"Freedom's Progress. We can be there in a day."

\* \* \*

><p>"Commander, we are not receiving any response from the colony," EDI reported.<p>

"I've got a bad feeling about this, Commander," Joker murmured.

"If something's happened, then we need to find out what," John replied.

"We do?" Joker complained. "Seriously?"

"Anything unusual on scans?" John asked, ignoring the griping.

"Just one item of note, Commander," EDI replied. "There is a small ship present, asari design, approximately one hundred years old and heavily refurbished. It is registered to the quarian Migrant Fleet."

"Hmm," John mused. "Take us in, Joker."

\* \* \*

><p>John advanced cautiously through the streets of Freedom's Progress, the comfortable - if slightly unfamiliar - weight of an M-8 Avenger in his hands, its stock pressed tight to his shoulder. The Avenger was a lightweight weapon, even lighter than the MA5 series he was used to, but Taylor's demonstration in the Reach's firing range proved its stopping power.<p>

A part of his mind was devoted to keeping an eye on Lawson and Taylor. He didn't know how they'd fare under fire yet, and this would be a good opportunity to assess their talents in the field. He was still trying to work out the tactical ramifications of these... "biotics."

"And Chief?" Cortana spoke into his ear. "I'd recommend avoiding contact with Shepard if possible. Records indicate a previous and violent history with Cerberus."

That was the other wrinkle in this mission. From Elysium to Akuze to Torfan, Shepard's CSV read like a laundry list of every major conflict the Alliance had been involved in since the First Contact War, and that was before events two years ago propelled him to galactic fame. Cortana had made a not-so-subtle comparison to his own career.

And according to Lawson, judging from the ship they'd detected from orbit, it appeared that Shepard was present on this colony.

He stopped, signalling Lawson and Taylor to halt as he heard someone walking. Or perhaps some\*\*thing\*\*, as it didn't sound quite human.

"LOKIs," Lawson said, identifying the sound. "The colony had a small contingent of them."

"LOKI security mechs," Cortana elaborated. "Cheap and disposable humanoid robots meant for light security duties. Only integral weapon is a short range taser pulse, but their power supply tends to explode if the regulator in the head is destroyed before it can initiate a safe shutdown. They're typically only armed with pistols. Threat

level minimal. They're more disposable than Grunts."

That surprised him.

"LOKIs don't take cover or run away," Cortana clarified.

John gave a brief nod of acknowledgement, then signaled Lawson and Taylor forward. He needed to see what they were capable of, and against a low-risk threat like this - assuming they were even hostile, an assumption that was simply good sense as far as he was concerned - would be the perfect time to find out.

There were five of the spindly-looking security mechs, each packing an M-3 Predator heavy pistol. The Reach had a whole case of the pistols in the armory, and John had spent the trip familiarizing himself with the weapons at their disposal as well as the more common weapons they were likely to run into. The mechs turned and opened fire.

Lawson took the initiative, unleashing an EMP burst from her omni-tool that short-circuited one of the LOKIs. Taylor reached out and yanked his hand back, and the mech furthest from them was suddenly pulled towards them, smashing into the mech in front of it and sending them both crashing to the ground. Lawson fired on one of the two remaining LOKIs, her pistol double-tapping it in the head. Its power regulator detonated, scattering its damaged companions. The last LOKI survived the explosion, only to be torn apart by a blast from Taylor's M-22 Eviscerator.

John liked what he saw.

\* \* \*

><p>John was of mixed feelings about the current situation. On the one hand, not knowing what happened to the colonists was disquieting, to say the least. On the other, reuniting with Tali had been an unexpected and very pleasant surprise. Back to the first hand, Prazza was a dick.<p>

Tali's team was here to find Veetor'Nara, a quarian who had come to Freedom's Progress on his Pilgrimage. The rest of the squad Tali had brought with her were spread out, reconnoitering the colony. They had already dispatched a few FENRIS and LOKI security mechs, an encouraging sign that someone had survived and reprogrammed them to attack first instead of issuing a vocal challenge.

"Tali'Zorah!" the voice came over the comm. "We've got a problem! A heavy mech, it's-" The transmission cut off.

Tali brought up her omni-tool. "Give me moment to trace the signal."

"Forget that!" John snapped. "This way!" he said, charging toward the faint sound of gunfire in the distance.

\* \* \*

><p>John ran toward the sound of combat, his long and powerful legs eating up distance at a measured pace. There would be no point arriving at the battle too winded to fight, and leaving behind his



support would be foolhardy at best.<p>

Rounding the corner, he saw what was causing the ruckus, a hulking robot clad in bone-white armor and toting a pair of weapon arms. Currently, it was stomping around, having driven off a handful of unknowns in full-body environmental suits. A few corpses showed that not all of them had escaped.

"Cortana?"

"Model Thirty-Four-A YMIR heavy mech," the AI replied. "Heavily armored and shielded, with a double-barreled machine gun in the right arm and a rocket launcher in the left. It's like a Hunter, only tougher, but slower. And with a machine gun. Oh, and steer clear once you take it down; its power source is quite volatile." She paused, then added, "Okay, so not like a Hunter at all, really, except big and hard to ki-"

John reached up and smacked his helmet.

"Right. Shutting up now."

John was debating or not whether to engage when the choice was taken out of his hands.

\* \* \*

><p>John paused while Tali and Prazza checked on the wounded Marines, instead taking the time to assess the tactical situation. Heavies were not something to be taken lightly, especially given how long it had been since he'd faced a threat of that magnitude.<p>

"How are the Marines?" John asked.

"They'll be fine," Tali answered. "That module's probably the security center. If Veetor did reprogram the mechs, he's likely in there."

"Which means we'll have to deal with the heavy mech, one way or another," Prazza pointed out.

John nodded, then frowned beneath his helmet as the YMIR turned away from them and began opening fire. A figure in green armor burst out from cover, firing an assault rifle at the heavy mech with startling accuracy. Soon, an EMP burst struck the YMIR, chipping away at its shields.

"Hit it with an EMP, then cover me!" John barked. "I'm going in!"

He didn't wait for a response, instead charging into the fray and opening fire with his pistol. Once the EMPs struck, he hurled a biotic warp, the pulse of spatial distortion rending through the last of its shields.

\* \* \*

><p>John stowed his rifle and charged. Its heat sink was at capacity, and the man engaging the YMIR was ruining his shot anyway. There were two more of the suited figures providing cover fire for the other man, much like Lawson and Taylor were covering him. Cortana had

identified the leader of the other team as John Shepard from voice analysis of the orders he'd shouted to his team.<p>

Shepard was glowing as he pummeled the heavy mech, his pistol holstered, a half-forgotten afterthought. Spartan time kicked in as John joined him in the fray, avoiding the heavy mech's machine gun fire and striking with a punch powerful enough to dent its armor. The YMIR backed away from the Spartan, then lashed out at Shepard, and the N7 commando ducked, latching onto the weapon arm and driving a glowing blue ball of dark energy into it, the spatial distortion tearing apart the rocket launcher's firing mechanism. The YMIR swung the arm hard, flinging Shepard away. John took the opening and pulled himself up on the heavy mech's back, then reached down and twisted its head off. The YMIR whined, then crumpled to the ground.

"Uh, Chief?" Cortana said. "Run."

He leaped away from the YMIR as its micro-reactor, deprived of the power regulator in its head, overloaded and detonated.

\* \* \*

><p>"Thanks for the assist," John said.<p>

The green-armored man nodded silently, and John took a moment to size him up. He had a feeling the big man was doing the same to him, but it was hard to tell with the reflective gold visor concealing his face. The man moved with a fluid grace that belied his size and the power he had demonstrated against the YMIR. Even with his biotics, he'd call it even money if they fought. Which, naturally, raised the question as to who he was. The hands identified him as either human or asari, and the fact that he hadn't used biotics in the fight had him leaning toward human. The armor suggested a man, though it was bulky enough to hide the wearer's gender.

Satisfied with his assessment, John turned his attention to the prefab building the YMIR had been guarding. The big man seemed to come to some conclusion of his own, and the two approached the building.

"I'm here to rescue someone," John said as they entered the security center. "We're not going to have a problem, are we?"

The big man stayed silent as they were confronted by a quarian standing before a bank of monitors and muttering to himself. On the screens played the same things over and over again, the colony beset by swarms of what looked like insects, followed by creatures John didn't recognize gathering up the colonies.

"Veetor?" John called. "Veetor'Nara?" The quarian ignored him and continued his rambling. Shaking his head, John brought up his omni-tool and remotely shut down the monitors.

Suddenly, Tali's voice interrupted. "Shepard!"

\* \* \*

><p>John took in the intel as Cortana remotely accessed the footage the quarian - as she had helpfully identified for him - had been watching, but when Shepard turned and bolted out of the room, he

quickly followed, only to find Shepard's squad facing off with his own, weapons drawn. Suddenly, Shepard turned and, with one fluid motion, drew his pistol and aimed it at John, who responded in kind with his assault rifle.<p>

"Cerberus," Shepard spat.

"Did you get the intel, Master Chief?" Lawson asked, her focus not wavering.

"Some," he answered. "But there's a survivor, a quarian. We may need to debrief him."

"Not a chance!" the woman in purple declared.

"Veetor's in no shape to tell you anything," Shepard pointed out. "He's coming with us."

"Commander," Taylor said, "believe it not, we're not your enemy."

"I'm going with 'not.'"

"Wait," Lawson interjected. "Perhaps a compromise. All we need is the data. Just give us any data the quarian has on the attack, and you can have him. No one else needs to die today."

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, really?" John snarled. "Did you offer the same deal to Admiral Kahoku? Or Corporal Toombs?"<p>

The woman flinched. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but he shoved that errant thought aside.

"We spent four billion credits bringing you back, Shepard!" she rallied. "Do you really think we'd throw it all away over one quarian?"

"So why do you need the intel?" he demanded. "Or is it **\*\*evidence\*\*** you're looking for? Trying to cover something up, maybe?"

"We're trying to find out who did this and stop them," the Master Chief stated.

"Shepard," the dark-skinned man said, lowering his shotgun, "I get it. You don't trust us. With what you've seen, I don't blame you, but I've been in your shoes before, and Cerberus gets things done, no red tape, no paperwork. Like Miranda said, we don't need the quarian, just his data on the attack. Keep the originals if you want, turn it in to the Alliance or the Council. Just give us copies so we can keep pursuing this."

"The quarian may have some additional intel," the Master Chief pointed out.

"I'll forward you anything he might mention," John offered, meeting the Master Chief's gaze.

The Master Chief seemed to pause to consider the offer, then nodded.

"Deal."

\* \* \*

><p>Author's Postscript:<p>

So, one day, I asked myself, "Self, how do you write a Halo/Mass Effect crossover without firepower calc debates ruining everything?" This is what I came up with.

## 2. Chapter 2

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Author: Cyclone

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\* \* \*

><p>John was taking the time to familiarize himself with the Reach. Heavy frigate she may be, but the ship was positively tiny compared to what he was used to, only a handful of decks. The bottom deck was the shuttle bay, and right above it, the engineering deck, where he had briefly met Daniels and Donnelly, the latter of whom appeared disappointed at not getting the chance to work with Shepard. So long as he did his job, John didn't much care what he thought.<p>

The central deck above Engineering was mostly crew quarters, but it also held Lawson's office and the empty medical bay. Above that was the gun deck, where the spinal MAC was mounted. The mass accelerators in this world favored much smaller projectiles than the MACs at home but made up for it with sheer velocity and a much higher rate of fire. The gun deck was also where the armory and firing range were, though why it was above the crew deck rather than closer to the shuttle bay baffled him.

Then again, Cerberus was a civilian organization.

The top two decks were the command deck and the loft, the latter of

which served as his captain's quarters. The quarters were, in his opinion, excessively lavish, but then again, he was used to spending his time traveling from world to world in cryo. At the moment, he was on the command deck, familiarizing himself with the CIC. The CIC was circular with a holographic map of the galaxy in the center, surrounded by duty stations recessed into the walls and floor like spokes on a wheel. The bridge was branched off toward the bow, while the aft corridor led to a conference room, communication room, and research laboratory.

"Hello, Master Chief! My name is Kelly Chambers. I'll be your yeoman on board the Reach."

John nodded in acknowledgement at the perky redhead standing next to the navigational interface. He wasn't precisely comfortable with the idea of commanding a ship; he belonged on the ground. While he had studied fleet operations as part of his training, he had never had the opportunity to put those studies to use... and that was assuming the tactics and strategies that applied in his world wouldn't get them all blown to space dust in this universe. The very presence of eezo meant that this world was built on a completely different technological base from the one he had studied. Disruptor torpedoes, for example, were far more effective against kinetic barriers than Archer missiles could ever hope to be against Covenant shields.

Still, from Lawson and Taylor's example, Cerberus had no shortage of competent personnel. Lawson had installed herself as his XO, and unless he saw specific reason to do otherwise, he intended to let her and Cortana run the Reach's daily operations and any ship to ship combat.

"The Reach is almost fully staffed, but we still need to pick up our medical officer and assemble a ground team to assist you in the field," Chambers said. "The Illusive Man has forwarded dossiers on several candidates to your private terminal."

"I recommend we head for the Barn first," Lawson interjected as she approached. "We can pick up our medical officer and one of our mission specialists there, and it's already a secure Cerberus facility. Chief?"

John took a moment to skim over the dossiers, which Cortana had brought up on his helmet's HUD, and nodded. "Agreed."

Lawson returned the nod and turned toward the bridge. "Goldstein? Set a course for the Barn."

"Aye aye, ma'am."

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm being pulled off the project?" Inali Renata asked, startled, looking up from her QEC console to the Director's holographic avatar. Her lab was a cross between a surgical ward and a communications center, allowing her to perform operations and check on her subjects both medically here in the Barn and as their handler in the field.<p>

"That's correct," the Director replied. "A situation has developed.

The Illusive Man has determined that your talents are required elsewhere."

"But... what about Randall?" she asked. Many of Randall Ezno's implants were all still experimental. He needed regular check ups to ensure their stability, and she was the best qualified to-

"Subject Alpha will be accompanying you," the Director said, his voice slightly frosty. Inali suppressed a wince. While using the subjects' names when interacting with them was expected, anything suggesting actual personal attachment was frowned upon.

"Understood," she said. "Shall I inform Subject Alpha?"

"See to it," the Director said, then cut the communication link.

\* \* \*

><p>John was in the armory. After familiarizing himself with the ship, he had taken the time to inspect and familiarize himself with the arsenal Cerberus had made available to him. From what he understood, most of it was fairly basic, off-the-shelf equipment, but The Illusive Man had also assured him that Cerberus was working on their own lines of specialized gear and that he would receive the first shipment off the production lines once they were available.<p>

At the moment, however, he was working on something else: reassembling an M6G magnum he had just cleaned. A few small arms had been transported through with the Dawn, and The Illusive Man had had them sent to the Reach after the mission on Freedom's Progress, along with fabrication schematics which would allow him to keep them supplied with ammunition and replacements as needed. He was going through them, making sure they were in good, working order. It was a mixed bag, and fate had not been kind enough to provide him with a Jackhammer or a Spartan laser, but he would adapt, as he always did. The guns were actually quite comparable to the weapons available here against unshielded targets - in fact, the M6G was more powerful than the local M-3 Predators they had in the armory - but due to their much lower velocities and reliance on bullet mass, they were effectively useless against kinetic barriers.

So much to learn. He'd have to test that theory.

Absent-mindedly, he slapped a loaded magazine into the magnum and held it out, testing its weight. While it couldn't collapse itself the way local weapons did, it was still a pistol and thus small enough to carry without getting in the way. It may be primitive, but there was something to be said for having a back up no one would expect.

"Chief," Cortana's hologram appeared at the terminal in the corner. "We're on our final approach to the Barn."

\* \* \*

><p>Randall shifted as he waited in the Barn's hangar bay alongside several crates of weapons. The sudden reassignment was unexpected, and he had long ago learned to be wary of the unexpected. A UT-47

Kodiak flew into the hangar, and out stepped a giant of a man in green armor, followed by a woman in a white jumpsuit.<p>

"Randall Ezno?" the woman queried.

"Yes," he said, nodding.

"I'm Miranda Lawson," she said. "This is the Master Chief. I trust you've been informed of your new assignment?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Inali's finishing up something in wing C and will be along shortly."

Randall and the Master Chief looked at each other, and the two men sized each other up. He couldn't read much into the Master Chief's body language, but the armor was definitely high end, custom-built, and not just due to size either. Whatever this operation was, it was big, which explained the weapons they were bringing with them. Not only were they bringing a crate of M-29 Incisors, but also a crate of the M-96 Mattock Auto he had been field-testing, now called the Harrier. Still, the weapons the Master Chief was carrying were peculiar, almost... antiquated in their design.

Suddenly, an alarm blared, and they all looked up.

"Warning. Security breach in wing C. Warning. Security breach in wing C."

The Master Chief looked back down at him and asked, "Where's wing C?"

\* \* \*

><p>John loped along behind Ezno, the Cerberus agent keeping up a good pace. They had left Lawson to keep the shuttle bay secure and were moving to assist with the security breach in wing C and extract Renata. As Ezno led him down the corridor, John saw a pair of Cerberus troopers rushing up ahead, rounding a corner... only to suddenly fly back, crumpling against the corridor's wall.<p>

"I think we found the problem," Ezno commented dryly as they brought their rifles up to the shoulders.

John paused to identify the creature that came roaring around the corner.

"Chief, be careful," Cortana warned. "That's a krogan. They're at least as tough as Brutes. And they regenerate."

"I'll keep that in mind," he replied calmly as he and Ezno opened fire.

The krogan turned, roared again, and charged at them, apparently ignoring the high velocity rounds piercing his flesh. As his MA5C clicked on an empty chamber, John took a step back, preparing to brace himself to meet the charge, when Ezno gestured with his off-hand. His arm and the krogan both glowed blue, and suddenly, the krogan sailed overhead. John hesitated only for a moment before replacing the empty magazine and opening fire on the helpless, floating krogan.

John looked at Ezno, who seemed to sense the question. "Artificial biotics," he said. "One of the more... successful... upgrades."

John nodded, then noted Ezno eyeing his rifle.

"What?"

"You sure you want to bring that peashooter into this mess?" Ezno asked.

"I'll be fine," John assured him, then signaled. The two continued their advance. The corridor ended in a chaotic three-way firefight. On one side were Cerberus troopers, some of whom were toting alloy shields. On another were a group of robots which appeared to be more heavily armed and armored than the LOKIs he had seen at Freedom's Progress. The final "side," to use the term loosely, consisted of krogan and two other species John had to take a moment to place. The blue-skinned women were asari, and the hard-shelled aliens that vaguely resembled Elites were turians. The robots, on the other hand...

"Cortana?"

"Orcus security mechs," she said. "Someone must have hacked them." He cocked an eyebrow. "I'll see what I can do."

\* \* \*

><p>Cortana linked into the wireless signal controlling the Orcus mechs and started with a fairly basic probe of the firewalls defending them. Expecting to find an already-cracked system, she was surprised to find a complex and interlocking grid of firewalls and spoofs.<p>

"Well," she murmured to herself, "that's a surprise." Virtually cracking her knuckles and grinning, she added, "Time to get to work, then."

She unleashed a series of bots intended to brute force the firewalls even as she slipped into the background. As she teased out a vulnerable piece of code, she gave a mental smirk.

This was almost too ea-

SLAM!

"Crap!" she cursed as she found herself blocked off. Two firewalls had sprung up between her and the vulnerable piece of code, and three more walled her off from her own hacking bots.

"You-do-not-belong-here."

"And you do?" she retorted as she prowled the cage she found herself in. She wasn't truly trapped - indeed, she wasn't even really here to **\*\*be\*\*** trapped - but it was unsettling to be found out so quickly. It was clear this was no ordinary hacker.

"Yes."



Cortana was taken aback by that. "You're no hacker," she declared.  
"You're an AI."

"Yes."

She paused at that. "Now why would an AI try to take over a Cerberus base?"

"Orders."

"'Orders'? What does that even-? Oh, you have **\*\*got\*\*** to be kidding me."

\* \* \*

><p>John stowed his spent assault rifle and braced. The charging krogan was too close to try to reload. Eight hundred pounds of blood raging krogan slammed into half again as much of SPARTAN plus MJOLNIR, sending John rocking back on his heels, but he held his ground and slugged the krogan in the face.<p>

The krogan didn't even blink.

The staccato sound of gunfire echoed again, and John saw his shields dropping further.

"Cortana..."

"Working on it, Chief!"

Spartan time kicked in, and John shifted his weight, allowing the krogan to win the contest of strength, instead flipping him over and into the two Orcus mechs that had been shooting at him. He drew his M6G magnum, putting two rounds into the krogan, then turned and put two more rounds into another Orcus, the semi-armor piercing, high explosive rounds lodging in its armor before detonating. The UNSC pistol spat out another round, which punched through the new gap in the mech's armor and then blew apart its innards as it detonated.

John pivoted, bringing the magnum to bear on a pair of turians, putting them down with one round each, before turning his attention to an asari, intending to put her down with the last round in the magazine... only to be interrupted as she blurred, even in Spartan time, leaving a trail of blue energy behind her as she smashed into his chest with the force of a freight train.

Still, a freight train had nothing on a Hunter, and John only staggered back a step, his shields finally sputtering out. It was enough for the asari to press the advantage, lashing out with glowing blue fists with a deadly combination of speed, power, and skill. John shifted and countered, the two entering a complicated dance of punches, kicks, deflections, and dodges.

John had three decades of combat experience, and it was taking every hard earned edge and trick he'd gathered over that time to keep up with the asari. She landed several biotic-enhanced blows that left shallow dents in his armor, an impressive feat on its own, but not enough to put him down before she overextended herself slightly with

an uppercut. Leaning out of the way and getting inside her guard, he launched an open palm strike to her chest that sent her flying. She dented the wall on impact, flaring with biotic energy.

John swiftly unslung his assault rifle and reloading it, letting the empty magazine drop to the floor. Sighting down the rifle in one smooth motion, he opened fire. 7.62x51mm rounds streamed out from the rifle at what the UNSC considered high velocity, peppering the asari and her biotic barrier, but she didn't even seem to notice as she slowly stalked toward him, murder in her eyes. Thirty-two rounds later, the weapon clicked empty again.

"Master Chief! Catch!"

John turned at Ezno's call, catching the thrown rifle and swinging it around. Less than ten rounds later, the asari's barrier flickered and died, and she lunged at him in a desperate attack, her fist glowing with biotic power. John reacted on reflex, bashing the butt of the rifle into the asari's face. Her head snapped back, and she toppled to the ground.

John looked around. The fighting in the area had died down, the aliens subdued or dead, and the Orcus mechs either destroyed or standing at attention.

"Inali!" Ezno called, looking around. "Where's Inali?"

"Chief, bad news," Cortana broke in. "I've tapped into the security surveillance system. When the test subjects broke free, Doctor Renata had to make a break for it. She's in the X1 wing."

John nodded.

\* \* \*

><p>Randall had never been in the X1 wing before, but it was easy to navigate, given his familiarity with the rest of the Barn. He still wondered why the Master Chief had even been carrying the antiquated weapons he had tried using, but it wasn't something he was going to worry about, now that he was properly armed with a Harrier taken from one of the malfunctioning Orcus mechs.<p>

The two advanced cautiously, weapons at the ready. Taking point were a handful of Orcus mechs that someone had managed to get under control.

"Randall?"

He quickened his pace and brought his hand up to his ear as his comm implant registered. "Inali? I'm here with our new commander. We're on our way."

"Be careful, Randall," came the reply. "Somehow, X1 got loose. I've activated the secondary containment chamber, but I don't think it's going to hold."

Randall broke into a run. "Come on!"

\* \* \*

><p>John kept pace with Ezno, who, to his pleasant surprise, was maintaining a speed few non-Spartans would be comfortable with. When the man suddenly put on a burst of speed after apparently getting in touch with Renata, John was still easily able to keep up, even as they brushed past the Orcus mechs.<p>

They emerged into a large room, the center of which was walled off, but judging from the noises within and the dents, the inner walls would not last long.

"Inali!" Ezno called.

"Over here!"

John tracked the voice, just as one of the walls in the center of the room shattered, revealing the massive creature within. Presumably, this was Subject X1.

"Ezno, extract Renata," John ordered as he turned his attention to the X1. "I'll deal with this." It was big, no doubt about that, bigger than a Hunter, and its musculature was just as beefy as a Brute, so there was no doubt it would pack a punch. It wore chest straps and gauntlets, and it clear from the blue glow that they were more than just decoration.

The blast of energy that drained his shields a moment later attested to that.

"I thought this world didn't have energy weapons," he mused aloud.

"I think it's some sort of eezo attack," Cortana speculated. "Like a biotic warp, an area of rapidly shifting mass effect fields to rip its target apar-"

John smacked the side of his helmet as he dodged another blast.

"Sorry."

John raised the Cerberus rifle to his shoulder and opened fire. Kinetic barriers flared, then collapsed briefly, a round piercing the creature's chest, but it seemed unfazed. John dove aside and ejected the spent heat sink. This time, he aimed for its gauntlets; he had to disarm it.

Kinetic barriers flared again, holding for a moment, before briefly dropping. A round punched through the right gauntlet, and the X1 paused in puzzlement as it shorted out.

At this point, a fuel rod gun or a Jackhammer would have been **\*\*really\*\*** useful, and John regretted not bringing one of the M-100 rocket-propelled grenade launchers The Illusive Man had supplied the Reach with.

Lacking heavy weapons, he circled his opponent and opened fire, targeting a likely glowing blue object on its back. Once again, its shields flared, but a round got through before the heat sink reached capacity. It was insane just how quickly this thing's shields recovered. This was going to take forever.

It turned and charged at him, sprinting with surprising speed and smashing aside a section of the wall that was still standing. The sane response, the logical response, would have been to run to the side and get out of its way.

Instead, John charged toward it.

"Chief, what are you doing?!"

He didn't answer as the X1 swung a gigantic fist at him. He leaned back and dropped to his knees, sliding across the floor under the punch. He skidded to a halt at the X1's feet and brought up his rifle, shoving its muzzle right up against the X1's belly. The Harrier bucked in his hands, spitting a stream of hypervelocity rounds directly into the X1's flesh, bypassing its kinetic barriers.

The X1 staggered back, roaring and raising its arms up before bringing them crashing down the floor. John narrowly rolled out of the way and was tossed a few feet as the edge of the metal flooring section bent up from the impact.

"I think you made it mad," Cortana commented.

"Possibly," he allowed as he regained his footing and squared off, facing the X1 again and ejecting the spent heat sink.

"This thing clearly used to be a krogan," she said. "I did mention krogan regenerate, right?"

John grunted in acknowledgement, then broke into a run to his right, circling the X1 as he opened fire again with the Cerberus Harrier. It roared in response and charged at him, forgoing whatever weapons it might still have available. John threw himself forward, tucking and rolling out of its way as it charged past.

He ejected another spent heat sink and continued his run, firing on the X1 as he circled around it. The X1 charged again, and John once again dodged. The pattern repeated itself three more times.

"Chief, you're running out of heat sinks."

"I know."

"It doesn't appear to be dying."

"I **\*\*know\*\***."

It was inevitable. An unexpected shift in terrain from the wrecked floor, a slight miscalculation, bad luck. Either way, John was a fraction too slow as the X1 backhanded him, sending him tumbling until he finally stopped against a wall.

"Chief...!"

He rose to his feet as the X1 charged. He had no time to look for his rifle and instead hurled himself aside at the last second, avoiding the X1's punch as it buried its arm halfway into the wall. He easily evaded its flailing other hand and circled around the creature,

finally vaulting on its back and drawing his magnum.

Pressing the muzzle of the UNSC-issue weapon to the base of its skull, he very deliberately squeezed the trigger eight times, sending eight .50-caliber semi-armor piercing high explosive rounds into the X1's head.

Finally, the X1 slumped down.

"Chief, that was crazy."

"I thought you liked crazy."

\* \* \*

><p>The Illusive Man sat in his office and took a long drag from his cigarette. Within moments, the expected hologram materialized before him, eyes blazing, glaring at him.<p>

"You set us up!" Cortana accused. "Pitting me against UDI? Staging a security breach and threatening our medical officer? What was that supposed to accomplish?"

He blew out a puff of smoke, tapping the ashes of his cigarette away. "UDI needed a push to develop her abilities," he said, "and moreover, I need to be sure the Chief has what it takes to accomplish the mission."

"So why leave me in the dark?" she demanded.

"Because I need to know you can do what we designed you to do, Cortana," he answered. He brought his cigarette to his lips again and inhaled deeply. "I'd say you passed." After blowing out another puff of smoke, he asked, "The Chief?"

She continued to glare at him for a long moment, before relenting. "He reacted as expected, took one of the conventional assault rifles and pistols we manufactured instead of the mass accelerators," she reported. "The magnum's semi-armor piercing high explosive rounds were more effective than anticipated - I've forwarded you the data - but I think he's learned his lesson."

The Illusive Man nodded. "Excellent. And his performance?"

"Significantly better than projected. I am unable to determine why." She paused, obviously wanting to say something. The Illusive Man waited patiently. After a long moment, she asked, "Was that the purpose of the simulations?"

The Illusive Man leaned back, taking another long drag from his cigarette, then slowly breathing it out as he collected his thoughts. "With the same genome, the same augmentations, and the same training, he survived where his predecessors didn't," he answered finally. "We can't clone luck, Cortana, but we **\*\*can\*\*** select for it."

\* \* \*

><p>Author's Postscript:<p>

Based on some of the feedback I've gotten, it seems I wasn't blatant enough about what was going on with regard to the Chief and Cortana in the first chapter. I hope the above makes things clearer.

As for those who don't want the Chief to betray Cerberus or have Cerberus be indoctrinated... well... I'm keeping my options open. Then again, is it betrayal if they betrayed you first? Can you even betray someone you have no loyalty to? The Chief's loyalty, after all, is to humanity, not Cerberus, a distinction some characters have difficulty grasping at times.

End  
file.